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WHITHER?

By FRANK PATTERSON

MANY musicians have fallen into the habit of preaching rather loudly that the music of France is the greatest in the world and that France is the greatest of musical nations, an opinion of which the present writer has had the opportunity, during a long residence in France, of observing the gradual growth, even before the war, and the sudden excessive development during the past year or two of peace.

Unfortunately this belief is not isolated, not that of a few, but is rather frequent. Of course, the level-headed French artists preach caution, but others appear so convinced of the manifest truth of this belief that they no longer hesitate to proclaim it, forgetting that "self-praise is no praise." Yet there must be a foundation for this belief, there must be an array of facts that can be placed behind the assertion to support it.

And what is this foundation? Debussy!

Debussy, the great innovator of this century, the man who has performed the wonder of creating a school which all the world follows. Debussy, the inventor of a style, a manner. An iconoclast who set up new idols to worship in place of the old, who mapped a new country, who chartered unknown seas.

Is this fact or fancy? Is it indeed true that Debussy has exercised a universal influence over the music of the day? Undoubtedly!

There are few who have not come, directly or indirectly, under his sway. He was not a great composer. He was not a Bach, a Beethoven, a Wagner. But he was a very definite composer, if I may use the term. He possessed a definite individuality, an unswerving unity of style that is a sure indication of a very strong nature.

And he was French spiritualized, just as Verlaine and Mallarmé were French spiritualized. They are called decadent because they have fallen away from the purely impure, the directly, brutally carnal passions of an earlier generation. Tired scions of their race, they realize the failure of love to bring any real, lasting happiness. The dregs of earthly love are bitter to the

taste—therefore, all things are futile and there is no joy but in dreams of imaginary times, of Hellenic Utopias that had never any more veritable existence than the fables of the ancients or the fancies of poetic folk-lore.

Verlaine and Mallarmé with their Fauns and the pessimistic decadence of their love sonnets, Maeterlinck with the mystic rhapsodies of his early days (the days of his greatness), these are the concrete expression of the soul of Debussy. And we have but to study carefully, to follow up step by step, the development of the arts in France during the past century or century and a half, to note the impractical dreams of a Rousseau, the Utopianism of the Neo-Classicists, the only half concealed carnality of the Romanticists, the exaltations of the Latin-Quarter and Montmartre Bohemians, and in all and through all the courtly self-deception of lace ruffles and queens' antichambers—to realize that Debussy was no new thing, as no great thing is ever new, but a simple step in the world's slow evolution. Just as Bach grew out of the Ecclesiastical School, just as Beethoven arose as the apex of the melodists, just as Wagner was a unified expression of all that came before, with Weber, Beethoven and Schubert as his direct forbears, so Debussy was the pinnacle of French art-growth, not only in music, but in poetry and painting as well.

No one can look at the paintings of the great impressionists, with their vague coloring and their vaguer lines, no one can read the poetry of the Romanticists and their successors, poetry which seems to say so much but which really says so little, and is all the more expressive for that very fact—without understanding on the instant Debussy's place in the scheme of things, how he fits right in with the rest, a mere part of the whole.

But it is a strange thing of these developments that they are, indeed, always a part, never a whole. From them begins a new phase of development which seems at first a retrogression, and that for the reason that these new developments gather up lost threads and to weave them into a tapestry which is atavistic in tendency and design.

It would seem that, though we say, perhaps rightly, that the master founds a school, it is fatal to be his too slavish disciple. This is curiously contradictory, but it is undoubtedly true. The imitators of Beethoven failed one and all, so that even their names are now forgotten. And the imitators of Wagner? Within our own memory they sprang up by tens and dozens. Twenty or thirty years ago, every new opera that was given in Germany, and often enough in France and Italy too, was Wagnerian. I saw

in 1896 or '97, a perfect French "Meistersinger" at the Opéra Comique—and even such a man as Verdi, of Wagner's own age, with nearly his whole career behind him, made his "Falstaff" in the master's own image.

Yet those who took what was best in the Wagnerian plan, benefited by it and through them we see how Wagner has benefited the whole of music, or, at least, the whole of opera. Puccini, for instance, uses the Wagnerian method complete, uses it, having made it his own, uses it to his own advantage and to the advantage of the whole world of music-lovers. He uses a few set pieces just as Wagner did, his accompanied recitative is just as truly dramatic as ever Wagner's was; his harmony is vivid and expressive, and he uses a few well-chosen motives to lend unity to the whole.

But, being Italian, he gives melody to the voices (and may not that be a distinct improvement?) and, being Italian, he has written lighter music than the Bayreuth master and has left the gods and goddesses to the dwellers of the Rhineland. It looks like a retrogression but is not, just as the music of Chopin looks like a retrogression when compared with that of Beethoven but is not, for what it lacks in architectural beauty it makes up for in the strength and freedom of the passion of a less formal era.

Yet "Wagnerian" is a term of many meanings. It is used to express all sorts of things, almost everything, in fact, except what it is, what it has proved to be under the successful touch of Puccini, of Humperdinck, of Charpentier and of many others, i.e., an architectural design, just as all form in music is an architectural design.

It is used, generally, not in praise but in blame, not heartily but sneeringly. To call a work "Wagnerian" is enough to damn it in the eyes of many. It is a term of opprobrium, a reproach, an infamy. Because "Wagnerian" has come to mean heavy, turgid, all too serious, unsuited to the gay after-dinner parties and frivolous social functions of the dress circle. It has come to mean dark stages, mimic storms, gods and goddesses or kings and queens whose emotions move us too much or too little by their depth or their height or their remoteness from mundane hopes and ambitions. Like anything but small-talk and scandal, it is out of place at the dinner table. Give us something gay and adulterous like *Tosca* or *Thais*, which leave our deeper emotions untouched and give us a tickling, tingling delight and a subject for subsequent conversation as to the beauty and attractiveness of the mummers, who are not too far removed from us and through whose disguises we easily penetrate.

But "Wagnerian" is also a term of praise. It was intended so when certain foolish well-wishers dubbed Charpentier, on the occasion of the production of his "Louise," the French Wagner. Yet not without some reason. For if we could possibly imagine Wagner being French we might also imagine him penning something like "Louise." Certain it is that Charpentier emulated the principles of the master in this excellent work and, notably, without any slavish imitation. He did, in fact, in his way, just what Puccini and others have done in their ways.

Vincent d'Indy, on the other hand, and many other French composers before and after him, was Wagnerian in the worst sense of the word. He adopted, notably in "Fervaal," the spirit and the letter of the Wagnerian style. It is a feeble copy of "Parsifal" in which the author proves himself to possess as little ability as a dramatist as invention as a composer. This destruction, annihilation by absorption, of the weaker men is one of the most fatal features of Wagnerianism.

And now we come to another feature which is scarcely less tragic: I allude to the one-work composer. He is one of the most notable manifestations of our time; and he exists in the realm of instrumental music, on the concert-stage, as well as in opera.

How is a Mascagni or a Leoncavallo accounted for, with their single excellent works? And how the dozens, the hundreds, of composers who have started their careers with one or two lovely compositions in lighter vein and then fallen into oblivion?

How account for them? Perhaps an examination of the career of Mascagni, by far the most notable of them all, may furnish a clew. Let us look at his work. We find his *Cavalleria* a bald, unrefined dramatic statement, possessed of neither subtlety nor nobility, yet super-excellent of its kind and of the very soil of Italy. And then, it seems, this composer wanted to be what he was not—a noble ambition in a way, and certainly no one can blame him for it. We find him repudiating his old style altogether and trying to be, am I wrong to say, Wagnerian? At least striving to be big, strong, technically complicated, striving, perhaps, to be recognized as a musician by musicians (and forgetting to write melody).

Leoncavallo? Did he not plan a trilogy to be dedicated to the Kaiser Wilhelm or something of the sort? And Verdi? Can we say that he, too, would not have been led astray had he come under the august influence earlier in his career, since he turned his back on the 'song-opera' when he penned "Falstaff?"

And now the French? Is not the same thing taking place in France on a large scale? The history of French music is a record rather of lightness than of depth. With the very early composers—Couperin, Rameau we have nothing to do, nor are we concerned with the importations—Gluck, Meyerbeer, Rossini. We might also, omit the name of Berlioz. For he was thoroughly un-French. And was he not one of those unsuccessful successors of Beethoven of whom we have spoken above? Nor was his talent sufficient to assure his lasting success—and it is the successful ones who are copied, copied, often enough, just because of their success.

The others? The real French school? Let us pick out a few at random as memory brings them to mind: Boieldieu, Auber, Bizet, Halévy, Adam, Delibes, Gillet, Méhul, Lecocq, Gounod—all of them successful writers of opera and ballet, all light with the scintillating lightness of France. And the instrumentalists? Lalo, Chausson, Chaminade, Sauret,—Vieuxtemps was a Belgian, so was César Franck. Then there was Massenet, Saint-Säens, Godard, Messager, d'Indy, and, finally, Debussy.¹

And where does Debussy belong? Surely, it must be evident at a glance that he does not belong at all! He stands alone, an isolated figure, who belongs rather to the painters and the poets than to the musicians—a curious development which seems to have taken place in poetry and painting while music drifted along untouched by its influence until Debussy burst forth with the glorious song of its emancipation from the old ideals.

It is true that the style of Fauré is somewhat related to that of Debussy and may have influenced it to some small extent. It is also true that there is a certain similarity between the Debussy manner and that of Dukas and Florent Schmitt, and, in a curiously indirect way, certain works of Stravinsky;² indeed Debussy has been accused of having borrowed his style from the Russians. (As if any great composer could really borrow anything worth while from anywhere!)

It is obvious, of course, that Debussy's modernism kept pace with other modernism. The whole world of music grew modern, as we call it, after Wagner; some naturally, others with affectation and malice aforethought with the evident object of making up in originality for what they lacked in talent. This development

¹There were others of course. I have not tried to "list them all" but only to point out the general tendency.

²It is amusing to note that a passage in the introduction to "L'Apprenti Sorcier" (Dukas) is almost identical with a passage in Stravinsky's "Fireworks," and that the principal passage of the Dukas piece is strangely like the "Funeral March of a Marionette" (Gounod). So much for relationships!

is in line with what has already been mentioned with reference to the immediate succession of all great musical giants and would be discouraging did not history point out the strictly temporary nature of this sort of illness and the world's rapid recovery from it. It consists in the case of the immediate successors of Wagner, and perhaps in other cases as well, of stealing the bone and leaving the meat. All that these modernists could see for awhile was a freedom from all formal rules, an apparent absence of tonality, an unrestrained use of discords or dissonances, enlarged contrapuntal possibilities, and so on and so forth. What they were blind to, was the firm, healthy, full-blooded flesh that covered this skeleton and made it possible for it to live: the splendid melody, the firm rhythm, the unity and sanity of the whole. They seized upon the dry bones and mistook their janglings and cracklings for the sweetest of music.

And so it is to-day in France. They are overcome with modernism, with the spirit of Wagnerism or Debussyism. They tell themselves, they tell each other, they do not hesitate to tell the world, that the music of France is to-day the greatest of all music. "Désormais la musique française a le droit de réclamer, dans le concert des nations, la place qui lui appartient, et qui est, ne craignons plus de la déclarer, la première"—thus Julien Tiersot in "*Un demi-siècle de Musique Française*." Henri Collet writes in similar vein. Vincent d'Indy storms bitterly against foreign music on the French concert and opera stage. And so also many others.¹

Who are these composers of the day who set French music above that of the rest of the world? Tiersot says "that he has been able to cite almost two hundred names of French composers every one of whom deserves to be applauded for his serious qualities, and of this number a large proportion are of the first rank."

But who are these composers? We need surely not bother our heads about Berlioz, Bizet, Bruneau, Chabrier, Gounod, Massenet, Saint-Säens and others of the older school whom we know not to be of the highest rank (with the possible exception of Saint-Säens.)

And of the others, the younger school? We have Aubert, Charpentier, Chausson, Dukas, Fauré, d'Indy, Pierné, Rabaud, Ravel and Schmitt, and again we have none that are of the highest class. For the output of those who are really interesting—Aubert,

¹One writes: "L'école française est à la tête, depuis vingt ans, du mouvement musical" and thus puts a date on it. Another places 1902, first performance of "Pelleas," as the definite beginning of the emancipation.

Charpentier, Dukas, Ravel, Schmitt—is too limited. You cannot make a career and enter for your nation into the musical world-Olympiade with but two works like "Sillages" and the "Habanera" (Aubert) or with one "Louise" (Charpentier) or "L'Apprenti Sorcier" (Dukas) or "Salome" (Schmitt) or the few of Ravel—his "Ondine," his "Mother Goose Tales," his "Heure Espagnole," etc.

Again we are left with just Debussy—and his successors. But who are these successors and whither are they going? Schmitt and Ravel and Aubert we have already mentioned. As to the others, the list is long;—a few may be mentioned: Gabriel Dupont, composer of orchestral pieces and operas, Roger-Ducasse, orchestra and piano works and songs, Raoul Laparra, composer of "La Habanera," Déodat de Séverac, Léon Moreau, who wrote an interesting flute concerto, Albert Roussel, Grovez, Samazeuilh, Caplet, Rousseau, Paray, Milhaud, Koechlin, Rhené-Baton, Gaubert, Fourdrain, Nougues of "Quo Vadis" fame—these and many others furnish the programs of the concerts of the Société Nationale, the Société Musicale Indépendante, the "Œuvre Inédit," furnish occasional new works for the large orchestras and for the opera houses of Paris and the smaller cities of France and Belgium.

Of these men too many suffer from the strange disease the symptoms and characteristics of which have already been outlined; the disease of insincerity, of striving to be what one is not, of stretching oneself like a child and saying "I am a giant" and of imagining oneself so in reality. The successful French composers—Massenet, Saint-Säens, Bizet, Gounod, etc.—were free from this (how can any composer be successful without being free from it?). Even Debussy was nearly (perhaps entirely) free from it. His larger things (with the exception of "Pelléas")—"L'Apres-midi d'un Faune," "La Mer"—are his best. And, if he strove seemingly to out-Debussy Debussy in the exaggeration of his adopted style, he was, at least, standing on his own legs and not on somebody else's.

That is not true of the present generation. Whither are they leading? What path do they follow? It is hard to say, but, whatever way it may be, it is certainly not their own, for these vague outpourings, these imitations of greatness, Debussian on the one hand, Wagnerian on the other, could not possibly be natural to anybody. The interesting and deplorable part of it is that many of them evidently have talent and have begun their careers by penning bits of such pure melody that their ability is indisputable. One may well ask what has become of Pierné

since he wrote his charming little "Serenade?" What has become of Louis Aubert since he composed that lovely bit of song entitled "Légende?" What has Paladilhe done since he gave the world "Psyche" and "Mandolinata?" If these and others had been willing to walk in the footsteps of Halévy, Gounod, Bizet, Massenet—but they were not! Paladilhe wrote heavy grand opera and symphonies, Pierné oratorios and symphonic poems, Aubert abstruse, unsingable songs.

The songs of Ravel and Louis Aubert, and, indeed, practically of all of the present generation of French composers, all show the same glaring fault: the accompaniments are lovely, the voice parts nil! That is to say, they are musically attractive but as songs destined to failure. (One of the results of the influence of Wagner. For did anybody ever think of placing the melody—whatever melody there is—entirely in the accompaniment until Wagner pointed the way?) Does Ravel really imagine that the sort of discords he is dealing with at present are likely to add anything to the fame he deservedly won with his "Ondine?"

The influence of Debussy and Wagner, the baneful influence of modernism (which is the natural expression of the few but not of all the world), the desire to be "big," especially bigger than the hated rival, Germany, have pushed out of sight any memory of the true spirit of the French music of the past. Its greatness was its charming spirituality, its lightness, its daintiness, its gaiety, its expressiveness, in other words, of French nature as all the world knows it.

It is true that there is another side of French nature, or rather a more refined, and deeper, variant of this other, which led to Debussy and to the influences, cited above, which were his artistic paternity. But the musicians of the rising generation are not inspired by these influences. They are trying to write chamber music, symphonies, though no French composer (nor Italian, and the French are surely more Latin than Teutonic) has ever eminently succeeded in either of these fields—and their operas are more Wagnerian than either Italian or French. The influence of the successful opera writers of France is wholly absent. "Faust" and "Carmen" are not wholly forgotten but indignantly repudiated (and the works of Puccini are scorned. D'Indy even goes so far as to say that they are "not even well written.") In spite of which they regularly draw record audiences at the Opéra Comique). The traditional German claim that France could only write opéra-comique is felt to be the vilest of insults, though the French might well reply that Germany has utterly failed in this line.

But of this the new generation does not think. Massenet, who was the teacher of many of them, is scorned. They must be "great," "big," "symphonic," must cling to Wagner's coat-tails or wear Debussy's old clothes, must be anything but what they are: charming, affable Frenchmen, descendants of Louis XV and Louis XVI, with the gilt and frippery of their furniture, the rococo of their decoration, the spindle-legged delicacy of their chairs and tables, which remind one, somehow, of the fluffiness of toy spaniels—of the "salons" where philosophy was not a subject for turgid thought and furrowed brows but of light and bright conversation—of light loves and gay infidelities, of formal gardens with their statues of mythical beings, of Fauns and Amours, of Psyches, Nymphs and Hamadryads. Why should the French Adonis wish to puff himself out (like Mark Twain's 'Jumping Frog' which could not jump) to imitate the German Hercules?